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ABSTRACT

Teachers who use a dialogic approach to teaching and responding to student writing view their comments as a conversation with the students. They view writing in relation to the larger context of writing--the type of writing, the audience and purpose, and the conventions of the writer's community. When responding to student writing, a teacher's goal is to focus on the text a student is trying to construct--to assume the role of reader, coach, mentor--monitoring the authority their responses exert over student texts by aiming toward facilitative rather than directive responses, collaborative rather than authoritative responses. Events and opinions voiced at several panel discussions at professional meetings on response to student writing led the researcher/practitioner away from traditional response theories. With a focus on the classroom, particularly teacher-student relationships, she continues to search for connections between classroom activities and outside influences such as large-scale assessments because these connections help explain why educators, at times, contradict themselves. Constructivist classroom practices are at odds with traditional assessment theories, yet traditional theories influence the classroom through large-scale testing instruments and their consequences. Traditional views of testing and concomitant views of language acquisition were drilled into the minds of teachers, parents, administrators, voters, and politicians, each playing a part in what goes on in the classroom. When teachers teach to the test, they drill students on surface features. When these drills become habitual, they become conventional. Reflective practitioners must do more than reflect on their own practices. They must situate their individual theories and practices within the larger culture surrounding them. (Contains 43 references.) (NKA)

Responding to Student Writing: Locating Our Theory/Practice among Communities.

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Responding to Student Writing: Locating Our Theory/Practice among Communities

In *Shared Territory,* Margaret Himley says, a dialogic approach to teaching writing locates writers "historically, as situated within the chain of texts that have preceded them and as oriented toward the subsequent possible response of readers of all sorts.... Dialogics, provides one way to theorize composing as irreducibly and profoundly social" (5). If composing is social, then writing teachers must think in terms of "border regions," with attention focused on "dynamic interactions among writers, readers, texts, and language (5). Teachers who use a dialogic approach to teaching and responding to student writing view their comments as a conversation with the student. They view writing in relation to the larger context of writing—the type of writing, the audience and purpose, and the conventions of the writer's community. When responding to student writing, a teacher's goal is to focus on the text a student is trying to construct—to assume the role of reader, coach, mentor—monitoring the authority their responses exert over student texts by aiming toward facilitative rather than directive responses, collaborative rather than authoritative responses (Anson, "Response Styles"; Baumlin & Baumlin; Fuller; Jeffrey and Selting; Knoblauch & Brannon; Moxley; Sommers, Nancy; Straub, "Concept of Control"; Straub, "Student Reactions"; Yancey; Warnock). Collaborative response should "preserve the integrity of the individual student's work, generate rethinking and re-visioning the piece at hand, and generate that student's own vision of herself as a writer at work, a writer in a dynamic state of *becoming*..." (Baumlin and Baumlin 181-82).

In1995, I began studying for a doctorate in rhetoric and composition. Soon persuaded by postmodern theories such as those above, I began working toward collaborative, facilitative responses to my first-year composition students. As I responded to students using thicker, more descriptive responses to guide and question them toward re-vision, current traditional habits continually seeped into my responses as I *directed* students in ways that took authority away from them. I struggled to create facilitative responses while fighting eighteen years of authoritative, directive examples set by my own past instructors. If this struggle had been short-lived, I doubt I would have paid much attention, but the struggle continues; moreover, I see others around me struggling as well.

At the 1997 CCCC in Phoenix, for instance, I attended a panel discussion on responding to student portfolios. After several short readings by the panelists, readings which clearly favored current portfolio and response theories, the participants and panelists discussed several pieces of sample student writing. Soon, however, the conversation shifted away from a concern with how to respond to individual students –toward a discussion of grades, as they settled on a particular reflective memo in which a student critiqued the instructor. Even though no one had access to the student's portfolio—though no one knew the context surrounding the reflection letter—though current portfolio and response theories do not support grading individual papers, and this was a session on *response to student writing*—the participants wanted to grade the reflective memo. Of the approximately 25 panelists and participants, only two of us brought attention to the shift away from response. After listening to our theoretical concerns, the other participants continued their discussion about grading the reflective memo, concluding that the student should be given a D or lower because they thought, even though the arguments were extremely well-articulated, the student had violated the teacher's authority. In "Registers of Student and Professional Expository Writing:

Influences on Teachers' Responses," Sarah Freedman writes about teacher reactions when students seem to overstep their expected roles: "As teachers we may tend to overreact to this overstepping, taking it as a threat to our authority, misunderstanding the writer's intent, and thus penalizing the student unfairly" (345). Just as the evaluators in Freedman's study overreacted, perhaps the participants in this CCCC session overreacted because they perceived the student had somehow threatened their authority—perhaps they "had grown used to the comfortable and powerful role of judge" (Sommers, Jeffrey 177).

Early in the CCCC session, the panelists discussed current portfolio theories and response theories which address issues of teacher and student authority. They understood that "All knowledge is subjective and contextual" (Belanoff, "Portfolios and Literacy" 17). The panelists and participants also understood that portfolios "redistribute power, draining some of it from the top and redistributing it along the bottom..." (Belanoff 23). Clearly, the panelists and participants at CCCC understood the importance of giving students authority over their writing—and understood the role context plays in reading and response—yet they were unsettled by the student's reflective memo. They were struggling, as I still do, away from a current-traditional approach to response and toward an approach that foregrounds collaboration—negotiation.

During a session on response at the 1998 Wyoming Conference on English, I encountered another researcher/practitioner caught in a similar struggle away from traditional response theories. After I read a paper on teacher response, this person asked me how it was possible to respond to a student text without an ideal text with which to compare it? When reading student papers, he said he needed to have an archetypal A, B, or C paper in mind. Before asking this question, he talked about a need for more descriptive rather than evaluative responses to student papers—one of several comments that demonstrated his exposure to and agreement with postmodern theories of response

that encourage interactivity between readers and writers, responses that explain, guide, and question students in ways that lead to deeper levels of thinking and revising (Anson, "Response"; Baumlin and Baumlin; Brannon and Knoblauch; Daiker; Elbow and Belanoff; Freedman; Moxley; Sommers, Nancy; Straub, "Concept of Control"; Tobin).

At the time, I couldn't articulate an answer to his question because I was parroting theory that had not become internalized. Now, I understand that to measure student writing against an "ideal text" is to subordinate, if not ignore, contextual and other important elements that must be considered when responding. The presence of an ideal text leaves little room for negotiation but instead imposes the teacher's version of the text upon the student writer. "Too often ... we simply tell the student what to do to 'improve' her paper; there really is no negotiation with the student, no attempt to leave the best and final choices of revision up to her" (Baumlin and Baumlin 179). When teachers have an "ideal text" in mind, they cannot see the text under construction, except in the ways that text relates to—or fails to relate to—the teacher's ideal. As Jeffery and Selting say in a recent issue of *Assessing Writing*, "What becomes clear in many faculty responses is the measurement of the student's ability to meet the (instructor's) standards of production while the rhetorical choices these novice writers have made are lost from view" (195). Kathleen Blake Yancey says that when we treat writers as writers, we must give them the authority to make choices. And, when "They may make decisions that run counter to our recommendations, and if they do so for reasons that are rhetorically sound, then we will need to defer" (*Reflection* 41).

While practitioners and theorists struggle toward theories of response that consider the interactions among writers, their texts, language, and their readers, they also struggle against current traditional habits and current traditional forces outside their classrooms. With a focus on the classroom, particularly teacher-student relationships, I continue to search for connections between

classroom activities and outside influences such as large-scale assessments because these connections help explain why some of us, at times, contradict ourselves. Constructivist classroom practices are at odds with traditional assessment theories, yet traditional theories influence the classroom through large-scale testing instruments and their consequences.

During the 1999-2000 school year, for instance, I taught a second semester writing/literature course at a local college. Both first and second semester courses require students to take departmental final exams that privilege surface conventions and rote learning, almost to the exclusion of critical thinking. The first semester exam focuses on grammar and usage, while the second semester exam focuses on literary terms, with two sections on reading comprehension, one for prose and one for poetry. The questions in the poetry section are based on subjective interpretations of a group of local instructors, and few of the multiple-choice answers in this section are implausible, making the questions particularly difficult for students. I discussed this with the chair of the department, who agreed the tests are primarily designed for grade deflation, that the average grade is 71 and a high grade is in the mid 80s. Though this grade deflation might be disconcerting on its own merit, the implications go beyond the numbers. Several hundred students each semester take this test, which reflects a current traditional ideology. The teachers must teach to it, encouraging students to memorize grammar rules and literary vocabulary—and to read literature with the notion there is a "right" way to read—that there is one right answer for each question concerning interpretation of a text. Consequently, even if teachers attempt dialogic encounters with their students, forces outside of the classrooms work at odds with those goals. Even if teachers attempt to share authority with students, outside assessments continually remind both students and teachers where the ultimate authority resides.

Again, the implications of traditional testing instruments are multiple. When people interact with a large-scale testing instrument, they also interact with its theory. As Peter Johnston says, assessment instruments affect both evaluators and those who are evaluated. When we assess literacy, "we engage in a social interaction with the individual or group being evaluated, and thus influence in powerful ways the nature of the understanding constructed by all parties" (511). This is not to suggest that taking a test will necessarily cause one to absorb the theory that drives the testing instrument. However, over time, if one engages in testing that consistently reflects a particular test theory, and if the interpretations and consequences are important to the individual, the ideology driving the test construction will influence that stakeholder. In the case of writing assessment, if the testing instrument privileges form over content, individuals who interact with this theory by performing/conforming to it will also adopt, over time, the underlying theories, especially when entire school systems teach to these tests, bringing the theories into the classrooms on a daily basis.

Large-scale tests have large-scale impacts on classrooms, in part because of the way theories accompany the instruments and in part because of the audiences invoked by the testing outcomes. In a recent study, Carbone and Daisley report that grades have multiple audiences: "students themselves, peers, parents/guardians, our colleagues, other professors in other courses, college administrators, graduate schools, employers, and legislators" (80). When teachers respond to students, they often respond to the student with concerns from both inside and outside the classroom. Even if teachers can ignore the multiple audiences outside the classroom walls, there is the student's interpretation of the response to think about, the student who is conditioned to consider the larger audience and the importance of the grade. Most students read our responses looking for clues as to what we want from them. They read our comments with one thing in mind: what does the teacher want, which translates into— "what do I need to do to this essay to get the

higher grade?" Only a rare student reads a teacher's comments looking for ways to expand ideas—looking for ways to complicate a message. Instead, they are conditioned to seek higher grades, always keeping that larger audience in mind.

Research shows that traditional testing is not uncommon in public schools and colleges, and these tests continue to influence teacher-student relationships (Bond; Kohn; Madaus; Sacks). According to Peter Sacks, though a performance-assessment paradigm is emerging, one should not "underestimate the near magical power that quantification, standardization, and the measuring of minds continues to have over Americans" (6-7). "Like a drug addict who knows he should quit, America is hooked. We are a nation of standardized-testing junkies" (6). Ironically, the teacher, who often bears the brunt of the responsibility, has only limited control over the classroom theory/practice. As teachers are saddled with the responsibility of improving student scores, they teach to the test, which means centering a practice around theories that reflect the testing instrument (Bond; Huot and Williamson; Kohn; Moss "Validity"; Madaus; Sacks; Tchudi).

Metaphor and Theory

Traditional views of testing and concomitant views of language acquisition were drilled into the minds of teachers, parents, administrators, voters and politicians, each playing a part in what goes on in the classroom. When traditional views and experiences become habitual they begin to seem natural or normal. According to Donald Schon, direct experiences are conceptualized as experiential gestalts, which are largely unconscious because they exist in us through the metaphors we adopt. Teachers who are currently under-the-influence of traditional theories may not be fully—or even consciously—aware of the presence of some of these metaphors and their influence on literacy theory. They may not recognize the metaphorical links between language and the theories driving large-scale testing instruments that privilege form over content and that situate authority

outside classrooms. They may not be consciously aware of the ways in which language and testing interact with one another and influence the language surrounding literacy and learning.

Roger Shuy's work on holistic learning juxtaposes well with Michael Reddy's work on the conduit metaphor, both showing links between language and pedagogical theories. People who succeeded under the traditional system, may assume, for instance, that they learned about preposition usage by focusing on prepositions when, in fact, they learned by acquiring concepts. When individuals are immersed in standard English, Reddy says, they unconsciously know that words, sentences, paragraphs, essays, and so on are containers with insides and outsides, containers into which thoughts are inserted. "You have *to put* each concept *into* words... *Insert* those ideas elsewhere *in* the paragraph.... Never load a sentence with more thoughts than it can hold" (Reddy 167). If one is to understand how to use prepositions—then one must know that words, sentences, paragraphs, essays, books, and so on are conceptualized as containers. When working with students who struggle with prepositions, however, teachers often focus on the preposition itself—on form over content—or what Shuy calls the "tip of the iceberg" (103). The "deep structure," on the other hand, concerns the way in which we conceptualize words. Without understanding that words have insides and outsides, a student struggling with standard English would have to memorize every instance of preposition use that might occur while talking about communication, an onerous, if not impossible, task. These "deep structures," though necessary to learning, are largely unconscious to most language users. These "deep structures" are acquired through immersion in a language system, not by memorizing parts but by working with wholes and parts—by interacting with content over form, by focusing on the message more than on the structure of the message.

Under the current traditional system, tests measure surface features of language. When teachers teach to the test, they drill students on surface features. When these drills become habitual,

they become conventional. In fact, when most people think of English teachers, they too often think of skills and drills. In the state of the union address, a few weeks ago, President Bush talked about increasing accountability, which means more tests. In response to the complaint that more tests mean teachers must "teach to the test," Bush said good. If he walks into a classroom and finds teachers drilling students in math and grammar, he said he will assume the accountability movement is working *very well*. Inculcated under the "skill and drill" system, Bush assumes the system causes success.

Concluding Remarks

Though theorists understand that correlations between standardized tests and academic success are questionable, that they reward "passive, superficial learning and drive instruction in undesirable directions," these tests prevail. Multiple-choice tests, which still comprise much of the large-scale testing, include only those questions that can have definite answers, promoting a belief in objectivity, a belief in "right" answers (Madaus 80). Those in charge of testing and school policies, succeeded under the traditional system and assume the system—and their cooperation within that system—caused their success—that they learned about parts by focusing on parts. It may not be obvious to this small percentage of the population who make policy decisions that testing systems reflect rather than cause success and that the systems reflect only a narrow view of success (Sacks 3).

By juxtaposing theories of classroom assessment-and-response with studies of large-scale assessment—and by considering metaphor and literacy theory, I am beginning to understand that the problems I've had with response are *not* located within me alone—or within my students—but also outside of the classroom, that to change my theory/practice, I must consider the highly complex relationship between students and teachers, students and testing, teachers and testing, and so on.

Response to student writing is not simply a communication between teacher and student but includes those in the classroom as well as members of the larger culture surrounding the classroom. In other words, reflective practitioners must do more than reflect on their own practices. They must situate their individual theories and practices within the larger culture surrounding them.

As a side note, I not suggesting we understand this larger picture in order to work around it, or to accept it, but am suggesting that we can do our part to expedite change. As researchers and theorists such as Kohn, Sacks, Moss, Madaus, Huot, Williamson and others work to change the theories driving large-scale assessment practices, practitioners play an important role in the classrooms. We can become more aware and make students more aware of influences outside the classroom and the impact those influences have on teaching and learning. By doing this we not only help transform the system in small ways, but we can more effectively bring constructivist practices into the classroom. For constructivist theories and practices to have a real impact on composition, we must locate and understand outside influences that negate our goals. We must consider the impact that those influences have on our responses to student writing, and we must teach students how to read our responses to their writing—how to read our responses as "situated within the chain of texts," as "irreducibly and profoundly social."

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